

1980

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# the ivoryton playbill

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1980

## FIFTY SUMMERS LATER

The remarkable history of the Ivoryton Playhouse which began fifty Summers ago, is really the story of one of the great personalities of the American legitimate theater, Milton Stiefel, the house's founder.

Stiefel, who celebrated his eightieth birthday this past May, was a protégé of the immortal David Belasco and for a dozen years before founding the Ivoryton, his career brought him national recognition. Before the age of twenty-one, he had already played with a score of famous personalities including E. H. Sothern, Julia Marlowe and Lionel Barrymore. (There is an unbelievable story of how Stiefel at Barrymore's insistence rewrote a script every night after rehearsal until a play was completely rewritten in a mere fortnight.)

Mr. Stiefel became the Assistant Director under David Belasco and remained the right hand and confidant to the man, considered by historians as the greatest director produced by the American theater, until his death on Milton's birthday in 1931. He was also a Manager for the legendary Max Reinhardt and for many years General Manager and Stage Director for Morris Gest, *entrepreneur extraordinaire*.

It was after several seasons of guiding the never-surpassed extravaganza *The Miracle* that Mr. Stiefel first came to Essex, Connecticut, in an effort to recuperate from severe exhaustion following that grueling production's closing in Dallas.

But quiet country living could not still Milton's ever-boiling "theater blood" and one day when passing through the sleepy village of Ivoryton his imagination was sparked by the sight of the unused recreation hall for employees of the Comstock-Cheney piano key factory. "What a unique location for a stock company," he thought, remembering his experience working with Detroit's stock manager, Jessie Bostelle, who had instilled in him the hope of someday having his own stock company. Fired with enthusiasm upon returning to the River Road residence, he invited his host's brother, Lawrence J. Anhalt, to join him in the venture and Larry half-heartedly teamed up and acted as publicity agent. The relationship proved unfortunate primarily because Anhalt considered the Ivoryton location déclassé (and after dissolving the association a few years later he produced an unsuccessful season of shows at the Old Saybrook Town Hall).

Stiefel bought the hall on September 14, 1938, from the Comstock-Cheney Company, thus making his permanent commitment to a theater in Ivoryton.

A noteworthy fact is that the Ivoryton Playhouse is the oldest professional self-supporting Summer theater in the United States. (The Cape Playhouse at Dennis, Massachusetts, founded at the same time, was a foundation from its beginning and Skowhegan was underwritten for a generation by the Swete family. Westport, now celebrating its

Ivoryton  
Playbill  
Co.

## GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY

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fiftieth season, was founded a year after Ivoryton.) Stiefel directed and staged every show from the start and has said, "I never had the desire to be a producer and managed to avoid it completely until after the War."

Ivoryton's opening show, the week of June 17, 1930, *Broken Dishes* had just closed in New York and lays claim to being the first play in which Bette Davis appeared on Broadway (in the role of the ingenue). In any event, Stiefel's staging encountered the nightmare of the leading man not showing up. Without a single rehearsal, this major role was ad-libbed by an unknown actor named Will Geer (later famous in many roles including the grandfather in TV's "The Waltons").

The Ivoryton company, formed mostly by known actors and friends with whom Milton had worked on Broadway, called itself "The New York



*The Hall and Milton as they looked in 1930.*



COMSTOCK, CHENEY HALL, IVORYTON, CONN.

Players" and he reports that "even though we had borrowed sets, borrowed props and borrowed actors from Broadway, we were lucky to fill forty seats."

Recently, Peter Comstock, Chairman of the Board of Pratt-Read Corporation (formerly Comstock-Cheney) reminisced: "As a youngster I participated in the first season and the one thing which impressed my young mind was the staff of actors and their amazing devotion to their calling. While they were performing the current production every night they were also deeply into rehearsing the next week's show, and one week an actor would have a lead role and maybe the next he would ply his trade as a lowly stagehand. Most of them came from New York and they all lived in private homes in Ivoryton, the same homes which often supplied props as well."

To stimulate interest from the sur-

rounding area (the conservative locals considered the whole operation an annoyance brought to the village by fast-living theater folk from sinful New York), Stiefel hired a small combo of musicians from Fordham University, made up a parade of station wagons, liberally interspersing a few attractive coeds, and entertained the shoreline beach communities, hawking Ivoryton's "New York Players."

The effort of these traveling minstrels helped, but the original idea of holding an after-theater dance was soon abandoned. By the time the seats were removed from the auditorium to make a dance floor, the small audience had impatiently gone home and the tired cast was left, dancing among themselves. Stiefel says, "We didn't break even on a show that first Summer until the very last week, but that was enough to convince me to hold on for the next Summer."

*The Playhouse and Milton as they looked through the eyes of cartoonist Hirschfeld in 1940*

## The New York Times.

SUNDAY, JULY 7, 1940

### THEATRES: A FEW NEW PLAYS, MANY REVIVALS



Here we have a bit of rehearsing in front of the Playhouse at Ivoryton, Conn. The director is Milton Stiefel, proprietor thereof, and the young lady is Marjorie Summers.

During the second season, more people came and somehow "The New York Players" survived. Many of the actors and technicians did the Summer stint as a lark and an excuse to get away from the city and imbibe in good country air. Besides, the trainfare to Manhattan was only \$2.65.

In addition to that Hartford girl, Katharine Hepburn (the second season), the company billed such names as: Will Geer, Mary Miner, Henry Hull, Philip Truex, Buddy Ebsen, Penny Singleton, Norma Terris and Conrad Nagel.

The group remained a stock company, though often Broadway stars made guest appearances, until the Second World War and the staff included many names which later became well-known within the profession. Some were: Bill Doll, Joseph Pevney, Fred

Fox, David Clark, Alton Wilkes and Eddie Gilbert.

By 1941, over 125 Broadway successes had been produced by the Ivoryton Playhouse stock company which had long since dropped the "The New York Players" tag. Among the more remembered productions directed by Stiefel were: *Tobacco Road*, *Dead End* (in which the current producer, Alton Wilkes played the role of the G-Man), *The Cat an' the Canary* (Katharine Hepburn's 1931 debut), *Golden Boy*, *Brother Rat*, *Room Service*, *You Can't Take It With You*, *Three Men On A Horse*, and two pre-Broadway tryouts, *Octagon* and *Poor Little Church Mouse* (billed as "World Premiers" and sponsored by William A. Brady and John Golden). Other exceptional presentations included Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (later staged by Stiefel at Hartford's

#### CONTINUED FOLLOWING WHO'S WHO IN THE CAST

*One of the last photographs of the stock company, taken in 1940, shows Milton Stiefel in the doorway, flanked by his brother and sister-in-law, Irving and Gladys Stiefel. Lillian Gish is center, in floral dress, with Conrad Bain, second to her right. Allen Ludden stands second from end of second row, between Carter Blake, extreme right, and Teddy Antczak with Al Veese to his right. Constance Ford is directly behind Miss Gish and Cliff Robertson is to her right. Buddy Carneal and Ed Strum are second and third from front row right. Charles Rasmussen is front row extreme left and Orin Hill, third from left, second row. William Miles is standing, with sun glasses, to Gladys Stiefel's right.*



Wadsworth Atheneum) and (direct from Broadway within days of closing) Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness*. During his career, Mr. Stiefel has directed nearly a half dozen plays on Broadway, including *Unexpected Husband* in which Josephine Hull had her first Broadway starring role.

Significant to the times, there were even associations with several film companies who were always on the lookout for talent . . . a good number of "unknowns" went directly from Ivoryton to Hollywood. Paramount Pictures chose Ivoryton, from out of a list of more than 40 as the ideal stock company and produced a film short showing its complete operation. A second, longer, movie was made several years later by Charles Turner who was Henry Hull's son-in-law.

This flirtation with the film industry, though exciting at the time, really emphasizes the negative influence Hollywood had on the then flourishing institution of the stock company. These groups had a tradition of permanence and professionalism never to be matched by the later amateur community theater movement. During the 30s, the public still wanted to see live plays, but the growing popularity of the now-talking pictures was the death-knell for the serious stock company where actors earned a full-time living.

Then came Pearl Harbor and Ivoryton played only one week in 1942 when it transferred the last eight weeks to New London's Bulkeley High School. With gas rationing and actors entering the military, Stiefel decided the stage would have to go dark for the duration. He points out that "even to this day the Essex area has never represented more than five per cent of the theater's patrons—Ivoryton's success has been because of the draw from the Shoreline and regions dominated by Hartford, New London and New Haven. I always counted on folks from such distant places as Westerly, Farmington, Meriden and even Bridge-

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port. With special stars, we drew from Westport and it was not unusual to encounter a half-dozen devoted playgoers from Manhattan."

Closing the theater in 1942, after a financially disastrous season, Stiefel took himself to Hollywood, accepting the position as Dialogue Director with Columbia Pictures. He hated the Hollywood approach to production so much that he quit just as he was offered a full Directorship.

The California panache was not to Milton's liking and his great unhappiness ended only when he returned to Ivoryton in 1946 and began plans for the new Summer season. But, now it was a different business (professional theater must always be a business if it is going to be a living vehicle and not mere entertainment). The War had introduced many different values to the public mentality and America has always been enamored by celebrities.

The "talkies" had come of age and now everyone wanted to see a "star." Even the stars of the real theater had to bow to the craze. Suddenly, great names like Henry Hull, Basil Rathbone, Lionel Barrymore, Tallulah Bankhead, Shirley Booth and Mae West were appearing in those title frames on the silver screen.

*A matinee crowd entering the Playhouse during the 1950s with poster featuring Tallulah Bankhead.*



*Direct from Broadway within days of closing. Eugene O'Neill's Ah, Wilderness Act I, Scene II, pictures the Miller family at dinner. From left to right: Betty Goodrich, Seth Arnold, Frederick Rath Jr., Nanon Kiam, Leon Janney, Helen Carewe and Percy Helton.*

The established procedure for the Summer theater would no longer work and Actors' Equity was now a viable force protecting the profession—a new formula had to be found. At this time, Stiefel was an Advisor to Actors' Equity as well as President of the Association of Summer Stock Theaters and many conversations were conducted in order to find a plan that would mutually protect the theater and the actor. From the beginning of his Connecticut house, Milton had often presented guest stars during each season so it was a natural course for him to convince Mike Todd that he could produce *Happy Birthday*, with his wife, Joan Blondell, using the stock company and a few other actors from outside. *Happy Birthday* became one of the first "package shows" in the history of the theater when it traveled on from Ivoryton.

Stiefel with his ever-perceptive judgment of the public had hit upon the idea that seemed to solve the problem. By devising a scheme to preserve per-

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he always treated them with understanding and personal concern. It is a fact that he respected their foibles and idiosyncrasies and genuinely tried to make them happy and comfortable during their week's stay.

Stiefel has a strong no-nonsense attitude toward all matters in regard to the profession. After twenty-five years within this writer's memory, the crabbing and cussing of apprentices still rings clear. One classic comment was, "He's a tyrant; he's unreasonable in expectations and very often I'd like to poke him in the nose; then, by gosh, I realize the Old Bastard is a genius and I'll never have an opportunity like this again."

Stiefel has explained that his toughness goes way back. He tells the tale of the time when early in his days with David Belasco, the Master was so unbelievably rough and rude to him that he walked up and quit on the spot. "Mr. B." told him he was too busy to consider his quitting at the time . . . by the end of the day the young Milton had learned a special disciplinary ploy that he never forgot and put into use for his own directing. His tactics have gained him the devotion of nearly everyone whom he has directed.

Stiefel is a man of special charm, leavened by appropriate seriousness but with a lively wit and amazing imagination—exactly what a good theater, itself, should have; the very reason for Ivoryton's success and fame.

Though the few years since Milton's retirement have been uneven, this fiftieth birthday year has nothing to offer but promise. The Ivoryton Playhouse Foundation has been eminently wise in choosing an alumnus, Alton Wilkes, as the Producer for this Golden Year which marks the rebirth of a venerable house and a monument to the American Theater. *by William C. Bendig*

*Mr. Bendig is a Trustee of the Ivoryton Playhouse Foundation and Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of the ARTgallery.*

the  
**ivoryton playhouse**

ALTON WILKES

*in*

*association with*

IVORYTON PRODUCTIONS INC.

*presents*

**CLORIS LEACHMAN**

*in*

**BUTTERFLIES ARE FREE**

*a comedy by*

**LEONARD GERSHE**

*with*

**SUSAN  
MERRILL**

*with*

**BRYAN  
ENGLUND**



*introducing*

**PHILIP BEEKMAN**

*Directed by*

**HAROLD J. KENNEDY**

*Scenery and Lighting design by*

**JEROLD RICHLAND**

# CAST

*in order of appearance*

Don Baker .....	PHILIP BEEKMAN
Jill Tanner .....	SUSAN MERRILL
Mrs. Baker .....	CLORIS LEACHMAN
Ralph Austin .....	BRYAN ENGLUND

*Song "BUTTERFLIES ARE FREE" by STEPHEN SCHWARTZ*

Guitar .....	ROBIN ROBINSON
Sound Design .....	("Showtime Sound") .....

## SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

*The entire action takes place in Don Baker's apartment on East 11th Street in New York.*

### ACT I

Scene I: A morning in June.

Scene II: Two hours later.

### ACT II

Scene I: A moment later.

Scene II: That night.

*There will be a fifteen minute intermission.*

## STAFF FOR THE IVORYTON PLAYHOUSE:

General Manager .....	Linda Bedell
Public Relations Director .....	Mark Pechenik
Resident Stage Manager .....	Allison Somers
Resident Designer .....	Kevin Wylie
Technical Director .....	Bert Wood
Master Electrician .....	Paul Gadebush
Assistant Technical Director .....	Evelyn Jones
Prop Mistress .....	Marina Reinhousen
Box Office Treasurers .....	Sally Nagy, Regina Coughlin, Lisa Rue
Head Usher .....	Mary Bowers
Technical Crew .....	Miceal Wenke, Tom Deedy, Sharon Johnson, Robert Rhue, Deane Oberstrom, Lisa Rue, Eric Archer, Amy Beck, Lee Tergesen, Stephen Marks

*This Fiftieth Anniversary Ivoryton Playbill has been created by Art Director Gregory Richardson and Editors Sally Devaney and Betty Thorndike of the Hollycroft Press, Ivoryton, Connecticut.*